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Briefs

NORTH KOREA: Denial of Nuclear Arms Production

North Korea last week issued its first, albeit muted, public denial that it is developing a nuclear weapons capability. Pyongyang's decision to respond at this time may reflect concern that recent charges, if left unchallenged, might undercut its self-styled image as a champion of world nuclear disarmament. The denial, contained in a low-level KCNA dispatch on 4 August, was pegged to a 29 July *Washington Post* report on the recent detection of a new facility—located at Yongbyon—which the paper said may be capable of extracting plutonium, a key ingredient in the production of nuclear weapons. KCNA characterized the report as an “utterly groundless lie” and as “shameless false propaganda to mislead the world public.” It reiterated the North's pledge, first made in 1986, six months after it signed the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, not to “produce, test, stockpile, or introduce” nuclear weapons or to “permit” the basing or passage of such arms within its territory. While there have been sporadic South Korean reports in the past few years that the North is gearing up to develop nuclear arms, these reports, unlike the more detailed account offered recently by the *Post*, tended to be vague and were ignored by Pyongyang.

Since early last month, when South Korean media meticulously spelled out the estimated capacities of the facilities at Yongbyon, Pyongyang has attempted to deflect attention from its own nuclear program by almost daily calling attention to the alleged basing of nuclear weapons in the South. As pressure mounts on Pyongyang to sign the safeguards agreement that would open the way for international inspection of its nuclear facilities—a move it has thus far resisted—the North will probably continue its shrill protest against a nuclear presence in the South in the hope that North Korea's own potential nuclear capabilities will create pressure in the South for the denuclearization of the entire peninsula.